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# THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

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## HOW AND WHY DO WE LEARN?

### I.

AN American philosopher has said : " Even a proverb may be true." Probably a few are ; more are half-truths ; many are individual facts which, stated as general truths, are fit only to mislead Sancho Panzas.

" Knowledge is power " is even less ; it is a mere trope ; the conditioning for the thing conditioned. Knowledge is no more power than a steam engine is power.

And yet the acquisition of knowledge is necessarily the great fact and the most manifest endeavor in organized education, and whatever theories may be held, practically all the time in all schools is devoted to it.

We have countless definitions of education made by teachers and educational philosophers, innumerable theories as to the purpose and end of the school.

Yet none of them mentions the acquisition of knowledge as the principal thing. We speak of the evolution of the individual, the calling out of his powers (false philology), all-around training, symmetrical development ; but none of us would venture to say in public : " The acquisition of knowledge is the purpose of the school."

But when we get beyond the definition and begin to write treatises upon educational methods, most of us fall back upon the acquisition of knowledge as the end aimed at, and particularly when we come to administer schools do we conduct them as if the imparting of facts were the only aim.

Moreover, this is the popular notion. Ask any boy on the

way to school what he goes to school for, and he will answer: "To learn." Ask his father why he sends his children to school, and, unless he be an educational theorist, he will answer: "To learn." They draw their notions from our practice and from their sense of children's need.

Surely, then, a fact so conspicuous needs careful study. If, in spite of our educational theories and definitions, the acquisition of knowledge is, both in popular notion and in pedagogical practice, the conspicuous and real thing in education, it behooves us to consider what is its function. I am well aware that this discussion will seem to the philosophers trite and unnecessary, to others futile and impractical; yet I am moved to start it, though with fear and trembling, for several reasons—particularly in view of some recent utterances upon educational topics with regard to isolation and analogy; and I am so moved, first by this apparent lack of consistency between our definitions of education, on the one side, and, on the other, our discussion of practical educational questions, and especially our administration of the school itself; second, by certain recent utterances upon isolation and the use of analogy in educational discussion which seem to me further to darken the horizon and obscure the vision, especially through the use of terms in unusual and abstruse senses.

Is the apparent lack of consistency real, or does it result from confusion of terms?

Let us ask first: What do we mean by the term "knowledge"? It is used in two senses: first as describing what is known, sometimes termed "objective knowledge" or the "body of knowledge." Stormonth gives among the synonyms of "knowledge," "literature," "art," "science," things purely objective. We use the term in this sense when we speak of "imparting knowledge," "acquiring knowledge." In these uses of the word it is evident that what is intended is something apart from the knowing mind, and which may be given to it or be made to influence it.

The other sense in which the term is used is that of a *mental state*, the effect produced within the mind by this external thing, objective knowledge. Some of the synonyms given by Stor-

month for "knowledge" in this sense are "erudition," "cognition," "acquaintance," "scholarship." When a truth is known, the objective knowledge becomes subjective. That is, "knowledge" as used in the first sense becomes "knowledge" as used in the second sense.

This use of the same term in different senses is doubtless unfortunate, but it can hardly be avoided. All metaphysical discussion is full of such confusion. Because our language for the expression of metaphysical ideas is of necessity borrowed by analogy from that belonging first to the material world, and as analogies are always incomplete, and as the same term often suggests many likenesses, absolute definition is almost, if not quite, impossible.

I need but to refer readers to the long and wearisome, and after all inconclusive, discussion of the term "consciousness" by the earlier writers upon the philosophy of the mind, each of many authors insisting that his use of the term was the correct one. All that a writer may hope to do is to make clear to his readers the sense in which he uses a particular term. Further discussion upon such matters is as foolish as the exciting arguments by English and American travelers over the relative accuracy of the terms "luggage" and "baggage," or "carriage" and "car."

After all is said, the fact remains that in speaking of the mind and its functions and activities, indeed of all metaphysical ideas, there is danger of confusion because most of the language used is of necessity borrowed by analogy from the physical world. This has come about through the growth of language. Physical facts and feelings were first evident, and words were devised to describe them. Gradually, as man advanced in intelligence, and became conscious of spiritual truths and relations, the words employed to describe the physical were transferred to the metaphysical sphere suggested by likenesses real or fancied. This is evident in regard to the simpler and more manifest facts which naturally first impressed themselves upon the consciousness and first required words to describe them. Thus *wrong* is *twisted*, *right* is *straight*, to be *wise* is to *see*, to be a *fool* is to *make up faces*. The list might be increased indefinitely.

Through long usage the physical origin of many metaphysical terms has been wholly lost sight of, as the word *mind* itself cannot be definitely traced to its source, but is lost in a cloud of conjectures, all of which, however, connect its earliest roots with those of the word *man* and at least suggest a physical origin. *Idea*, however, shows a clear family relation with the Greek verb meaning *to see*. These facts, it is true, are the commonplaces of philology, and I instance them merely to make it plain that it is quite safe to assign even the most purely metaphysical terms to physical sources, from which they were borrowed by reason of real or fancied analogies.

Many terms have not entirely lost their material meanings, but are used so commonly in metaphysical senses as to suggest no analogy except after research. Such a word is *right*, which is seldom used to describe physical relations except in geometry, and in its own derivative abstract noun "righteousness" is never so employed.

With many words the figurative use is still apparent, as when we speak of a *profound* mind, a *shallow* wit, a *clear* mental *vision*, *capacity*, *crookedness* of character, and the like.

It is clear that all the terms used to describe metaphysical ideas fall into one or the other of two classes of analogies: those derived from the animate world, which may be termed *biological*; and those derived from the inanimate world, which may be termed *physical*.

Thus, when we speak of the *growth* of the mind, of mental *exercise*, of spiritual *nutriment*, we are using a biological analogy. When we speak of *storing* the mind, of *building* character, or of *molding* it, we are using a physical analogy.

In common talk these various terms are used indiscriminately and cause no confusion, for common notions upon these subjects are at best somewhat vague. But when we are laying plans for educating the mind and begin to employ terms seriously and exactly, it becomes of great consequence what terms we use. It makes a great difference whether we treat the mind as a receptacle which can be *stored* with useful knowledge after the physical analogy, or as an organism endowed with life which is to be

*nourished* with knowledge and *strengthened* by exercise, after the biological analogy.

That the use of the wrong analogy has had much to do with the development of false and faulty systems of education and pernicious methods of teaching I shall endeavor to show in this series of articles.

The term "isolation" has been used to describe a plan of education, advocated by some, which might have been suggested by the story of Rasselas. It is, in brief, seclusion of the youth, during the period of education, from the ordinary interests and associations of life, in order that he may, undisturbed by the distractions which they offer, acquire much knowledge, and may by reason of such acquisition be fitted to take his place in the world after his restoration to it.

That such a view of education is closely related to the physical analogy applied to mind is evident. The recent exploitation of some of these views makes it seem not inept to endeavor to maintain the proposition, that the *end* of education is *social efficiency*, and that the *process* is one of *growth through nutrition* and *exercise*. This requires that the mind be regarded and treated as living and growing after the biological analogy, that we may have "life, and that more abundantly."

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